Barbara Rahke
Telephone Interview by Stacey Heath
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Before we begin the interview, I want to just ask to verify that you understand that the call is being recorded, and that you agree to the recording?

Yes.

And that you give your permission for the recording to be transcribed and then submitted to the Walter Reuther Archives at Wayne State University?

Yes.

If you could, for the transcription, please spell your last name for me.

R-a-h (as in Harry) -k-e.

Great. That's terrific. And you'll note that there is that beep--I presume that you can hear it--that will happen every couple of seconds to remind you that the call is being recorded. Ok?

Umhum.

Ok. I know that you were one of the early women organizers, and I'd just like you to tell me a little about what you did, and what your experience was like moving into organizing women.

I ended up in Boston on a fluke. I was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana, and did some college work after I graduated from high school but it was limited because of funds and also other family responsibilities. But I had always thought I would go to college and I sort of had an idea in my head of what was going to happen to my life and it didn't happen. So I ended up going to Europe for a year, worked for Honeywell as a secretary. While I was there I had some disturbing experiences with sexual harassment, just sort of demeaning behavior. So when I came back, I moved to Boston because a friend from high school was living there and needed a roommate and was working at Boston University and said she could help me get a job there, which she did. I had expected once I got there that I would continue my education. I thought that was the great thing about working at the university. And of course discovered our pay was so low, and they still charged us, even though we worked there, to take classes--I was a secretary--that I couldn't afford to take the classes. So then I found myself, in order to cover my rent in a shared apartment with three other people, working full time as a secretary at Boston University, I also had to waitress weekends and one week night, to be able to meet expenses including being able to take classes at Boston University. It was interesting because my job at that point was I worked in the counseling office for Metropolitan

College, which was the evening program for continuing students returning to college. So all day long I'm in there processing their work, and actually informally really counseling them, and was really struggling to be able to take my own classes.

So that was the backdrop of my thinking about my work. I think I still had issues that I had to overcome, and one of them was my shame of being an office worker. You know how you have these "ah hah!" moments at some point in your life. Obviously in the background was the rumblings and the profiling among office workers, the birth of 9to5, and I was connected to some sort of—I was trying to connect myself to the Boston Community School which was closely tied with 9to5, and so I--was part of its founding. So that was in my background. But I remember one day, somebody asked me what I did. I was somewhere, socially. It was a weekend or something. So I said, "I work at Boston University"—I went through these contortions of trying to say what I did without ever saying I was a secretary, I was an office worker. And finally it started getting embarrassingly awkward. And I just realized what was going on. At that point, I felt like, I **am** an office worker, I work my **tail** off, I produce work for all kinds of professors, I am getting paid **nothing**, and if anything, am I not only—I'm not ashamed about it, but I should be screaming it from the rafters. And that was a big change. That was a big change for me. And so of course I sought out the 9to5 meetings, and went to them regularly. At that point we were also organizing a union at Boston University and I had been very resistant to that when I had first gone there, because I was raised in a very conservative, **very** conservative non-union family in Indiana. So my first reaction was to be very negative. But everything was coming together for me. So that's my background.

Can you just give me some timeframe about when that transition was happening for you?

Let's see, I'm trying to think. It all starts getting vague over time. It was the early to mid '70s. We began organizing our union in '74. And let me say also that we weren't originally organizing a union. The university had frozen our step increase salary plan, where we had automatic step increases and I believe a cost of living. And they had frozen that to do an evaluation for a year and then had come out with what they called the merit salary plan. And that merit salary plan basically was merit raises, nothing guaranteed, all on a bell curve. So people were very, very, very upset. And we knew other people had been facing this at other universities, and it was a typical salary system that was being implemented on office workers. So we formed an organization called SCAMP, which was Staff Committee Against the Merit Plan. And we organized around that for a year, and did petition drives, and Karen Nussbaum at 9to5 and others at 9to5 helped. When I'd go to 9to5 meetings, we would get ideas from others about things we could do, so we did this petition about the merit salary system as we were organizing all out of our own pockets to pay for our newsletter. We started a newsletter called Coffee Break, which we mimeographed off and distributed. There were about 850 of us on the campus, spread out all over buildings, so I think that's why I stayed thin then, just walking, walking, walking always. And we finally submitted those petitions to the vice-president of personnel, and she, to her credit, really, in hindsight—her name was Pat Harvey, and she ended up going on to work for Jimmy Carter. She actually took a job

with the government. She said, "Well, I can't accept your petition. Because if I did so, I would be recognizing a union." And she sent us away. So we said, "Well, now, wait a minute! What's wrong with this picture here! Obviously she gave us the blueprint of what we're supposed to do if we want to move this issue forward." And so that's what we did.

When you say that's what you did—

We began interviewing, talking to different unions, trying to get information, because really we were all pretty naïve about unions. And so we did a search. We did this little search committee, and kept organizing on campus. Ended up picking a union, which actually was District 65. Other university workers had been organizing with 65 in Boston at that time, separate from...because there were two different things going on. Most of the 9to5 activity was prior to the creation of District 925. I think we chose to organize right at the time they were thinking about forming District 925. So this really pre-dated that just a little bit. I was certainly in close touch with Karen about that development and what they were doing. But it was a little bit late in our process. Our group had been talking to people at MIT and Harvard. So that's what we did. We started organizing with District 65. But it was a long haul. We started that in '74, so putting a date to all of this, our earlier activity and earlier networking started with 9to5 in the early—I got to Boston I think in '71. So it was right after that. Probably '72, '73, if my memory serves me right. These dates might have to be corrected.

And then we began our organizing. It was a vicious campaign. There was huge, huge resistance within the Boston community, within the employer community, and certainly among universities. But not just. I know Karen and I—there were radio shows being done by the MIT students and different students really talking about 9to5's activity and organizing, and we were all on the radio all the time, talking about this, and sort of at that point the orchestrated anti-union, union-busting activity that was—Modern Management Methods, known as 3M, was one of the highlights—was getting a lot of--people were just becoming aware of it. We did a lot of research on our salary system and found out that the kind of point system, merit plan, had originally been introduced by the Pinkertons, the old union busters. They had a company that had actually come up with this sort of method. The banks, we were getting documents from banks about how to avoid unionization, if you saw people standing by the water fountain, more than two people, you should immediately be suspect that there was union activity going on... There was just this big flurry. So our campaign, at BU, was actually one of the first private sector campaigns that was won at a university. We won that election in '78. And certainly continued to reap the benefit of sort of the whole bubble of activity among office workers that was going on in Boston. But BU did hire Modern Management Methods. It was just a vicious, vicious, vicious...for one year they litigated us and tied up our election. From the time we petitioned, it took us a year to get an election. And I remember our election was on May 24th, because my birthday was on May 25th. At our celebratory party, I turned 30, and I remember that was like just the coolest thing that could have ever happened. And in fact Modern Management Methods had an article the following year about them in the Wall Street Journal where they were bragging about

how they'd conducted a hundred campaigns against unions and had only lost two, the previous year. And one of those two was ours!

So on the one hand we have your experience working with women at BU and the contact with 9to5 and Karen. I'm wondering what was similar and different about that work from the work that you did at the UAW.
Oh, well...For a long time it was very similar. Because then what happened, it was after we won our election, then we were tied up in court for another six months where they challenged our election, and basically refused to recognize us. They just refused to bargain with us. They said we would have to...first it took six months to get certified, because the election was so close, and they had sent all kinds of people in to vote, and we had to challenge all those votes. Once we finally got certified by the Labor Board, they then refused to bargain with us, basically saying, we don't agree with the bargaining unit. We think the medical school should have been included. There was a big fight at that time also over what would be bargaining units in academia. And so, we're not going to bargain with you. And they knew that was a crushing blow to us, because our alternative was either to drag it out legally for three years, and we had, as most places did, about a 30% turnover, because the wages were so terrible. So that was a sure-fire way of just destroying us. Or we had to strike. At that time, the faculty at Boston University had also organized—they were AAUP. And they actually had a contract which was expiring, and they were at contract negotiations. They voted to go out on strike, the faculty. So we decided to take a strike vote in support of the faculty and also for our own recognition. So that's what we did. This was no small thing (chuckles) – 850 secretaries-- to put it mildly. And of course running a strike in an urban setting was pretty amazing also. And what was even more ridiculous was trying to work with the faculty, who with the leadership we had a very wonderful relationship.

In fact the professors I worked for had all been very active in the faculty union, as were people like Howard Zinn, and Frances Fox Piven, I mean, the university was just full of incredible visionary people. Bill Worthy from journalism. So we were basically covering all the picket lines. They hired lots and lots of off duty Boston police. Our picketers, the clerical picketers, were being arrested, and toes run over—I mean it was unbelievable. The women who worked in the president's office, for President John Silber at that time, we had never been in contact with. No one had the nerve to go in there, because he was so crazy. They walked out with us, and insisted on picketing their own building, dressed to the T. High heels and everything. And were blocking garbage trucks that had to go by there, who just didn't know how to deal with these women dressed up in high heels. Oh, it was crazy. So the university then offered the faculty a settlement. And the president of the faculty union said to me, "Come to our meeting. It's at the chapel, at Marsh Chapel, and talk to the faculty before they take the vote, because I'm afraid what's going to happen here." So I went in. And at that point I was the—I had been for some time the elected leader. And I was heading up the bargaining. So we went into Marsh Chapel and it had been raining and we were sopping wet. We didn't even have strike benefits. We had hand-made strike signs and the ink was running off of them. And the faculty were all sitting in the pews, and all of us, all women, are lined up on all the walls—we weren't all women, probably 80%. We had some wonderful men who

were office workers to support—working with us. Drenched, and I get up there and I give this speech about divide and conquer, and don't do this, and we can hang together here. They gave me a standing ovation and then voted to accept the contract and go back to work. (chuckles) We said, OK, what are we going to do here. So the first thing we did, since we had no strike benefits but we had an emergency fund that we were raising money for, was, as they all went back to work, including the professors I worked for, we collected guilt money off of them: "Give us your check, give us your check, give us your check." And we raised a lot of guilt money. A lot, a lot, a lot. Which helped us keep a lot of our people out on strike. Particularly some of the single women. Then they started coming to me saying, "Oh, just go back to work until after graduation." Because this was right before graduation. "And then we'll come back out with you after graduation." I said, "I don't think so!" Again, you know, they must have thought we were really stupid. So we didn't. We hung out there. But we again secured their leadership behind the scenes to try and broker a deal through the administration. And there was a very dramatic meeting. I think it was dramatic. Because the faculty liaison who was behind the scenes doing this—his name was Joe [Speezman] from psychology—he came to us and this was the deal. We had to pull everyone in off the picket lines, call a big meeting, I had to get up in front of the meeting, and tell people—I couldn't tell them anything about the deal—but I had to convince them and get a vote of support to go back to work for one day. And there would be spy sitting in the front row, being sure I didn't violate the terms of the agreement. And at the point we won that vote, that information would be communicated, and the university would immediately hold a press conference recognizing us. So, that's what happened. And it was a real—probably the most emotional experience I've ever had. And people really participated in the meeting. People were very upset about going back to work. It was back and forth. And then finally one person, I remember, David Eberly, got up. He worked in the library. And he goes, "We've come this far, you have to trust leadership at a certain point. I feel this is the critical point, and we need to trust Barbara." And we got the vote. And ten minutes later, the university was holding a press conference, and recognizing us. So that's how that happened.

Anyway, so then we went through a huge contract fight for our first contract, had to strike again. And at that point we had really sort of developed our strategic—and oh in the meantime, while we were bargaining, District 65 merged with the UAW. So in bargaining, we actually became UAW. And what that meant was UAW members started coming and being on picket lines with us; rallying, just giving us a lot of support. And also at that point, 925 [or 9to5?] had really gotten off the ground, and was organizing the librarians at Boston University. So that was another real positive connect, tying it all together.

Anyway, eventually, through some more sophisticated strategizing and using the press and faculty who were really helping us a lot through that, really a lot, we finally got our first contract. Just a little footnote, before I get off of BU. Before their next contract, the Yeshiva decision happened at the NLRB, which involved the faculty at Yeshiva University in New York, that said, basically the NLRB made a decision that private-sector faculty could no longer form unions. So the next time the faculty union contract

came up for bargaining, the university refused to bargain with them, and essentially they lost their union. So interestingly and oddly, when all was said and done, the faculty were the one that ended up with no union. Which was really terrible. But that's a whole other story.

After that, then I was servicing our first contract, beginning to do grievances—we had an office in Kenmore Square. So I was no long working at the university. I hadn't been for some time. I was full time working with the union. And then we got a call one day saying that the secretaries at Cornell University were interested in organizing. And a retired education director from UAW, Brendan Sexton, who was very well known in progressive circles, he actually was the one who—his local in Detroit was the really the local that put Walter Reuther's vote over the top, that got him elected. So Brendan had been an AA to Walter Reuther in many different capacities. He was a visiting professor at Cornell in Ithaca. There had been a group forming that was a student support group with office workers and other support staff—service, maintenance, as well, and technicians—that had been meeting, and Brendan had been advising and helping them, and they then decided to form a union, and were doing a search committee, and one of the unions they interviewed was UAW, so I get this call from David Livingston who was still president of District 65, now UAW, who said, "Somebody"—he actually was calling for someone else in our office but she wasn't available, so it slipped to me—"You have to go up and do this meeting with leaders from the UAW and with this group at Cornell that's trying to pick a union. But that's all. You just [do this bit]." So I went and did the meeting, with various people including Judy Scott, who at that time was a UAW attorney —Judy Scott's now general counsel for SEIU—but at that time she was a UAW attorney. And then they picked the UAW on the condition that I get sent up there to organize them. So that's what happened. And I was lured up there on the promise it would be a month to get it started, and I ended up being there three and a half years. And we were successful in organizing the service and maintenance workers there. Had as a group decided to petition for them first because the interest level among them was so much stronger. So the office, the secretarial office staff, and the technicians, voted to support them first. Then we'd come back around...We ended up also going to election for the technicians. And lost, again, another long dragged out vicious campaign. And we actually never got to an election with the office workers, although we created a huge cadre of leaders who came out of that campaign, some of whom...I haven't talked to her for a very long time, but the last I heard, Carolyn York was like assistant director of the AFSCME Women's Department now, and Stephanie Weiss went on to be the head or a significant PR position with the NEA; Curt Edelman, who came out of that effort, is now a key rep with UNITE-HERE; and Al Davidoff went on to do various things, I think is now with SEIU. There was just this huge group of leaders. And out of the technicians' campaign, people went into labor relations, went to ILR school as a result of it, gave up their jobs as technicians. And many, many, many, many other women office workers who stayed there, but their lives changed in dramatic ways.

So then the UAW formed a academic wage and hour council. They had wage and hour councils for most basic industries, but had never had one for university and college workers. So that was formed, and then I was appointed to the UAW International staff,

and also made first coordinator of the academic wage and hour council. And at that point, was then in the UAW's technical office and professional department. So the big difference for me then was that I was running all over the country, doing organizing. After Cornell, I went straight to Washington D.C., to do a failed effort at Gallaudet College, but I spent a long time there, even learned sign language to communicate with the office staff who were hearing impaired. But gradually over time, what ended up happening, was I was more, no more the leader but more the person trying to help people develop into the leaders they were.

And along way, when you were doing that work, were you bumping into 925 as you went?

Over time, less and less. But Karen and I...the answer's yes and no, and this is where memory starts getting a little bit fuzzy, because 925 was organizing nationally at universities, and when we knew that there was a campaign there, that was something we would use in our organizing as evidence and support of university workers organizing, or office workers organizing in general. Some of it's vague, but I know there were other campaigns that were going on that weren't in the university—the university sector was the one I was focusing on for a very long time, but there were other ones going on that we would also use. So we weren't bumping directly into each other, but we were certainly staying in touch with and staying aware of more the District 925 activity at that point, than 9to5 per se. Because I never got back to Boston. That was the worst part, (laughs), was I never got back to Boston. I got replaced and that was the end of that for our Boston office. Karen will remember I got a call at one point, I think it was when I was in that campaign in Washington at Gallaudet, and Karen pulled together a group of people that had been around in the beginning—Jackie Ruff I think was there, and maybe Ellen Cassedy, and maybe Sam Luciano, but---

END of SIDE A
START of SIDE B

You were talking about a meeting that Karen put together?

She pulled together...it was just a...I can't remember if it was lunch or evening, dinner, after work, whatever. To just talk about, ok, everyone's gone in different directions, but what happened. We all ended up moving—well not all of us, but there was definitely a movement and a focus on the union organizing end of it. And less focus on the 9to5 non-union part of it. I guess we'd all been around long enough to realize that our hopes for a real explosion of office workers around the country, in spite of the tremendous successes of the organization, and in spite of the movement that had formed, it had never quite gone to the fruition we'd hoped it would.

Why do you think that is?

That's why Karen pulled this meeting together, to have that discussion. I hope someone kept minutes of that meeting, because that was what it was, was "what do we all think."

One of the things I remember we all felt was we began the movement at a time that was full of potential in our country in general. There was the antiwar movement, the student movement, the civil rights movement was still very vital and alive. There was a movement. There was a whole atmosphere of change and challenge in the country. And that died. And as it did, it just became increasingly difficult to maintain the same kind of enthusiasm and passion and belief in being able to change things. I just know how we were then, where you just didn't qu—I was probably the best organizer then I ever was in my life because I didn't know everything. I didn't know enough to be afraid. We just did it. And as I continue to be organizer, I saw change over time: fear really taking hold of people. Fear of change, fear of their employer, fear of power, fear of...and that just wasn't as true when we were organizing. If it was true, we couldn't have won the elections we won. We couldn't have gotten the recognition that 9to5 got. We wouldn't have had the kinds of turnouts at rallies. I remember 9to5's wonderful...every year they had the coal...now I'm forgetting it...on National Secretaries' Day. There was always an event downtown where the worst employers were awarded a bag of coal, and the best employers were recognized somehow, I can't remember what that was. I just remember the coal. But there was huge turnouts for that, just huge! I can't imagine if you tried to do that today. Now I'm sounding pessimistic and I don't mean to. So that's one of the things we talked about, that happened, was, there was something bigger happening than just making mistakes with the office worker movement that impacted on all of us.

So would you say that the aims of District 925 were realized, or not realized, or partly realized?

That I can't answer, because...now are you talking about District 925 the union, or 9to5 the organization?

Both or either.

9to5, in terms of what it accomplished in Boston for people for so many years, I think were realized, because many, many workers were empowered to challenge their boss, ask for job descriptions—people didn't have job descriptions back then. Wages did go up for secretaries in Boston, for office workers in Boston. People did start demanding respect. For lots of individuals, rather it was done for the entire system, I think there was tremendous success. But did it turn into...I think at some point there was recognition that maintaining that individual consciousness raising was only going to accomplish so much. And there was a recognition that without organizing unions to be able to put into a contract and guarantee the gains that were fought for and won, that ultimately just even Boston-based, it wasn't going to accomplish, it could only go so far. And nationally, the geographic differences were so great that even that national movement couldn't really be put together except through a union framework. I think that's why the District 925 was born. Did it accomplish its goals? That's where I don't know how many elections District 925 won. I don't know how many contracts they secured. How do you quantify that? We know in general what's happened to the trade union movement with declined membership. I would say probably no, none of us really realized, even when I went to the UAW, our goals of winning campaigns never came to what they hoped they would be.

How would you describe the legacy of District 925 at this point?

Well, that it produced...it helped so many women, like myself, who had the potential. I don't think I could have moved forward until I had that "ah hah" moment, where I said I'm not ashamed of being an office worker any more. It brought a working class consciousness to office workers. And in doing so...but in language that fit the office worker world. It wasn't a blue collar model, it was a white collar model, but it was a working class model. It helped us not be office workers, who were pretending that we—I mean, when we were organizing, everyone always said, oh, I don't know if I'm interested, I'm only going to be here for eight months. I'm only doing this moving on to something else. That's what they all said. First of all, the movement helped us realize that wherever we were at that point was ok, and we should make it the best we could. And that we were workers. That's when I say a working-class...we were workers. We weren't better than other workers, we weren't better than factory workers, we were workers. Our work was different, and we deserved respect and dignity, and a decent wage and a rose. Right? So it brought a way for us to be able...language and role models and people that were doing our kind of work, women leaders to help us come to that realization, and doing so helped a lot of women get past their block, move forward to become leaders, become the leaders that they always were. And then teach a whole lot more women! And the result of it was a whole lot of women moved up into role models in the trade union movement and I think in lots of other industries that I wouldn't be able to track as well, in terms of non-profit work, social justice movement work, all kinds, all over the place.

Final question: what were your impressions of the character of District 925 as an organization, its members, its leaders...You've talked about how it brought women into these leadership roles and changed women's lives...

The movement wouldn't have happened without Karen. Karen was a dynamic...that's a strong statement, but I believe that. Because I think every movement...it's all timing, but having the right leader is really critical. Karen was not only very smart, or is, I don't mean was, but could articulate what people were feeling, showed caring, but also was not going to get stuff in just us all talking about it, but really had an agenda to do move things forward, which you could see and sense and so you wanted to be part of it. I think that was really critical.

Can you ask me the question again?

What was your impression of the character of District 925 as an organization, the members and the leaders?

Ok. Karen I worked with more closely than anyone else in 925. She was the one I was most in contact with. The other leaders that emerged certainly carried the same kind of passion for the movement, dedication, endless working hours, so I think the character was excellent. The membership like any membership was diverse. I certainly had to learn

how to sit in meetings and hear other women be there sometimes who I thought were still...still didn't get it, or were just completely caught on their own particular point but couldn't move beyond that. So 925's membership was diverse. But I found the members that really stuck with it, that really worked and contributed and helped build it were the ones who did get it. Doesn't mean the others weren't helped or they didn't deserve the help. But like any organization, to move it forward, you have to have people who get it.

Did the character of District 925 and those leaders and those members, do you think it left an imprint on the labor movement as a whole?

Oh, I think so, and when you say District 925 I keep going back to 9to5 also. Because although it eventually merged into District 925, I think people in general still think of 9to5. They didn't necessarily know all these changes. And yes, definitely. I mean, my gosh, they're going to bring out 9 to 5 again, the movie. What were the chances of that if no impression had been made. Maybe that's a silly example. But sadly, and this is why I would hope this history can get out in other ways, too, because there's a whole new generation of people out there. I'm on my way out. All of us are getting real old. And there's a generation below me that I think got the benefit of us talking about this stuff, but there probably needs to be another 9to5 movement.

What would you hope that this history, capturing this history, what would you hope that it passes on to the next generation?

Like anything in history, I mean I love history, and when I first got involved I was reading books on labor history and organizing. But you couldn't really read anything about the history of women organizing, except in the needle trades...there were some great...Florence Luscomb, this wonderful woman, who'd been a union organizer in the 30s or something, you know, when we were organizing in Boston, she was around. But there wasn't much for us to go on. There wasn't much for us to look at and learn from, and then to use that to make our own history. The history of 9to5 will give that to this generation, something we didn't have.

All right, that's terrific, Barbara, I really appreciate it. Is there anything that you haven't had a chance to say, or questions or anything you want to put on here?

Probably, the minute I hang up I'll probably think of something. [Pause] Just that to me, sometimes it does feel sad, because as we see the work in our country move so much in the service sector direction, the office workers have so much more power than they credit for or they get paid for. Power meaning the significant role they play in our industries and work and in our economy. So it still saddens me that they still don't have that recognition. But they will. But they will. It will happen, I believe that.

Good! Alright.

END of INTERVIEW